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ONWARD BOUND

A Paper about Personal Religion

By

VERRIER ELWIN



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THE REV. H. VERRIER ELWIN, *while an undergraduate at Oxford, wrote 'Onward Bound.' As the substance of it is of such universal application we have secured permission to reproduce it in the 'BANGWENT' Series. Verrier Elwin is now working with an Indian friend among the Gonds in the Central Provinces of India. These people, the original owners of India, numbering about 12 millions, have been successively conquered and reduced to appalling poverty. Very little Christian work has been done among them, and they are almost entirely without medical help. The author has started work in faith, and has built a tiny church and mud hut in which to live, at the village of Karanjia, situated near the sacred Nuluda, on the pilgrim highway, along which thousands of pilgrims pass every year.*

If anyone would care to help this work, Mrs. Elwin (1, Warnborough Road, Oxford) will very gratefully receive contributions and forward them.

R. C. THOMPSON,

London Padre of Toc H.

‘ONWARD BOUND.’

BARON VON HUGEL has analysed the growth of the religious consciousness into three stages, to which we may give the general titles of Authority, Speculation, and Mysticism. Most of us are in the middle period, that of reaction and exploration, where the Intellect is king. I think it is a kingdom that needs to be invaded on both its frontiers.

The stage of Authority is what one might call Public School Religion. We take things very much as they come, we accept them on trust, and rebellion is an expensive item on our budget. We find a good example of this stage in Dr. Keate, sometime Headmaster of Eton, who ended a sermon on the Sixth Beatitude by saying, ‘Now boys, be pure in heart! For if you’re not, I’ll flog you till you are.’ This sort of thing inevitably leads to obscurantism, either that of General Booth, who said he dealt with difficulties about the Higher Criticism as he did with the bones of his breakfast bloater—he put them on one side of the plate and went on eating; or that of the elderly party who, on first hearing of Evolution, remarked, ‘Descended from the apes! My dear, I hope it is not true. But if it should be true, we must pray that it may not become too widely known!’

Such a reduction of religion to a mere authority, compulsion and regulation, for many of us turned our schooldays into something like the Hebrew Sheol, a place of 'suspended graces and petrified moralities.' Even to-day we do well to remind ourselves of the answer to that defender of compulsory chapels—'If you don't have compulsory religion, you'll soon have no religion at all'—'I'm afraid my mind is not sufficiently precise to grasp the difference.'

Then we suddenly plunge into the welter and turmoil of adult religion. While sense and memory are the child's means of apprehending spiritual truth, youth's mode of approach is by way of question and argument. The very impressiveness of the external religion of boyhood 'stimulates indeed the sense of awe and of wonder, but it awakens curiosity as well.' 'Body and soul are growing in clamorous complexity in every direction, how then can the deepest part of our nature, our religion, not require to grow and develop also?' This is a crisis of the soul, and a perilous one. If we do not grow, all that is best in us will contract and shrivel up. Yet if we do grow, we may lose our faith or—what in some people's eyes is even worse—we may change it. But I believe that we must fling ourselves, in joyous daring, into this grand adventure of development. Hitherto religion may have been a placid and untroubled thing;

let us question it, test it, tempt its resilience, trusting in God. Or else religion may have meant very, very little to us: let us set sail boldly across the vast and stormy sea of the Divine, for there may be glories unspeakable beyond that wrack of cloud, or undiscovered islands below the horizon. One thing I do beg everyone: don't judge the future by the past. Religion meant ever so much more to me after I left school, than when I was still there, and I think I may say in all sincerity that Christ is at least a hundred times nearer, more vivid, more compelling to me now five years after that.

‘Take ship, my soul,
Joyous launch out on trackless seas,
Fearless for unknown shores to sail . . .

Away, brave souls,
Further and further sail.
O daring joy, but safe.
Are they not all the seas of God?
O further, further sail.’

I want to introduce you to another three-fold analysis, made recently by Professor Kirsopp Lake. He says that the three determining factors in the lives of the younger generation to-day are Purpose, Value and Mysticism. To that I would add the sense of Personality, the need for self-discovery and self-expression. I want, therefore, to group what I have to say round these words, translated into such questions as these: ‘What is the thing really worth having

as an Ultimate Purpose in Life?' 'What are the things really worth doing?' 'What is the Great Thing which will give light and permanence to these lesser purposes?'

We turn first to Purpose. What is our ultimate aim in life? Everything hangs on Purpose: to be without one means the Unemployment of the Will, and the degeneration of the personality into a shifty fellow who is always hanging about the street-corners of crisis, drawing an occasional dole of religious emotion to stupefy his conscience. A life purpose is much bigger than our profession; it is the thing which makes us enter it. It is the golden thread running through all the diverse manifestations which our lives may take, changing everything it touches into a like beauty with itself. To gain a life-purpose, if I may quote the Baron again, 'is like drawing out the Grand Jeu stop in an organ, which sets all the other stops to work in endless inter-action, with itself permeating and organizing the whole.'

But have we got anything like that? Or is our chief desire merely on the surface, affecting nothing save our own cribbed, cabined and confined existences? Are we like the man who,

'For ever plodding in important mood,
Had not a soul to reach one nobler aim?'

Mind you, a Life-Purpose is a dangerous and unsettling companion. Of course, if we've got nothing more than that miserable idea of merely earning a living, or making a career, it will probably have no very revolutionary effect upon us. If it is to do a noble and disinterested work in an honourable calling, it will call out all our energies and lay on us an inexorable discipline. And if it is that thrilling and radiant thing, to follow the Christ with passion, vision and sincerity, it may turn us literally upside down. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and the man who places himself at the disposal of the Spirit of God must be prepared to be landed anywhere. I mean this. We must ask ourselves very seriously: 'I *was* going to be a school-master. Am I really called to it, or may not God want me to be ordained?' 'I *was* intending to go into accountancy. Am I sure that I am not called to be a missionary? Am I certain that I *am* called to be a secular success?'

Do you remember the story of Gerard Groote, the fourteenth century 'Brother of the Common Life'? He had a brilliant career at the University of Paris, and promised great things for the future, 'in the broad ways of the world following the shadow of a great name.' But one day, when he was about our own age, he was watching the public games at Cologne. 'A stranger, with a devout face, clothed in very simple garb,

sad at seeing Gerard wasting his rare powers of mind and spirit,' came up to him very quietly and said, 'Why standest thou here? *Thou oughtest to become another man.*' Well, by the strength of God he did become another man, and the result of his change of character and profession was a spiritual renaissance in Europe which bore as its richest fruit the *De Imitatione Christi*.

He found a purpose—a magnificent, cherished, character-moulding dream.

'He whom a dream hath possessed, knoweth no more doubting—

For a mist and a blowing of winds and a mouthing of words he scorns—

Not the sinuous speech of schools he hears, but a mighty shouting,

And never comes darkness down but he greeteth a thousand morns.'

Such a dream, such a vision, is before us in Jesus Christ. He is at once the dreamer and the dream. He is at once the goal and the way thither—no pious memory of a fragrant visitor to earth long, long ago, but a living contemporary of our own. In Him alone is to be found the answer to Matthew Arnold's question, 'How to find the energy and power to bring all those self-seeking tendencies of the flesh, those multitudinous, swarming, eager and incessant impulses into obedience to the central tendency?'

Any who know the disaster of that struggle for self-mastery will recognise that no one, nothing, can unify us save the enthralling, fascinating love of Jesus Christ.

If that is to become a life-purpose, it involves saying a daily 'Yes' to the will of God. 'For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake shall find it.' A great life makes answer to the man who will say 'Yes' to God. As the Headmaster of Eton once said, 'The climax of the spiritual endeavour of the universe is the production of a Personality. The full realization of this personality is when we realise that we must give our lives away.'

And for Reward—

'Only the road and the dawn, the sun, the wind
and the rain,
And the watch-fire under stars, and sleep and
the road again.'

Always the road, dusty and uphill; but there is One with us on the road. Why should we not give our lives to Him, not because we expect to get anything for ourselves, but simply because He is so entirely lovable in Himself, and because if we belong to Him—completely—He will show us how to do many high acts of love to weary or bewildered fellow-travellers.

We come to our second-point—Value. 'What are the things really worth?' Our answer will

depend on the 'motive' running through our lives. For in the tremendous whirl of opportunities and activities which life presents, only some principle of rigid selection will enable us to conserve our energy and make good. Those very real and often noble things, Popularity, Success, Knowledge, Fame, Ease, Happiness, a Good Time, press us hard—

‘There’s nothing worth the wear of winning
Save laughter and the love of friends.’

And I do believe it is worth while making our lives as rich as possible, to learn all we can and as widely as we can, to form the grandest friendships, to love all lovely and honourable things, for these things our Master loved.

But I know how in the end they will be gall and wormwood unless we have valued them by some standard other and greater than our own pleasure or advantage. Have you read the epitaph on Nettlehip in Balliol Chapel: ‘He loved great things and thought little of himself: desiring neither fame nor influence, he won the devotion of men and was a power in their lives: and seeking no disciples, he taught to many the greatness of the world and of man’s mind.’

‘He loved great things and thought little of himself’—could there be a better motto for life? How different our lives would be were we to judge them by an acid test like that. Take one or two quite practical things—our attendance at

public worship, for instance. We grumble at church services and complain of lack of atmosphere and reality, forgetting that reality and atmosphere are within ourselves.

Following from that there is another great thing—what our fathers used to call the Quiet Time and the Morning Watch. A period of quiet and prayer or meditation at the beginning of every day or at some time during the day (or, of course, a daily Communion, but one or the other)—is essential to an ordered and Christ-like life. That will enable us to fulfil St. Augustine's ideal, 'Semper agens, semper quietus'—If you want the peace of heaven, work like hell.

The third point was Mysticism, or Reality in Religion. Continually I am brought back to the gigantic importance and urgency of Christianity. It literally is the biggest thing in the world—and we treat it as a sort of side-issue of our lives. We fail to hear 'eternity murmuring on our horizons and the noiseless knocking of Christ at our gates.' When Ignatius Loyala sent out the members of his Order he said to them, 'Pray as if all depended on your prayer; act as if all depended on your action.' How slack and indifferent we seem in face of a saying like that, which bears with it the intensity and grandeur of the spacious times of his great age. We are drifting, men without a mission, 'sedately torpid and devoutly dumb'; month after month goes by, and practically nothing gets done.

But at the same time, the years when we are starting on our own in life are for us crisis years. We get a fresh start, and a second chance. Religion becomes a new thing; no longer one department of life, but something embracing the whole of it. Religion is not merely, as one thought at school, a set of rules to be obeyed, or a series of services to be performed—though it contains both these things—but it is first and foremost a relationship with God. When we see religion like that it becomes vivid, living, magnificent. I think that is what the Holy Spirit comes to do, to identify religion and life. He comes in unseen majesty to men, purifying their inmost hearts. Does that mean anything to us? It may do. ‘If ye then being evil know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give His Holy Spirit to them that ask Him.’ I believe that promise is literally true, for God is never false to His inspirations. If I may say so in all reverence, the Holy Spirit is longing, eager, pressing to enter into a man’s life, to possess it and transfigure it with His own gentleness and beauty. He longs for our love a thousand times more than we could ever long for Him.

If you would have all that life has to give, fall in love with Jesus Christ. If you would understand the riddle of existence and possess the secret of life, abandon anything and everything for His

love. Only the lovers understand. For love knows no 'mine' and 'thine'; love will have no individualism. Man is no longer a finite, isolated thing. Love draws us into the fellowship, it 'kneads us into one cake' with God and the Church on earth and the holy and blessed dead. In His love for us Christ makes us members of His body, and we share everything with Him and with one another. We are never lonely in our temptations, nor unique in our triumphs. The whole Church fights in the battles of every sin-pestered soul.

In token of the fellowship we go day by day, or week by week, to the tryſting-place of the Love of God, there to be crucified spiritually with Christ and to be made anew in His own image. Here is forgiveness and the pain of it—the touch of the fiery cleansing spirit of God: for the life which He sends into a man is the very same that was in Jesus, a spirit that had been weary, tempted and in tears, a spirit of sacrificial love. We taste afresh the nearness of God's love, stooping, sorrowing, healing. Once more the cradle of the Incarnate God is set on earth, this time in human hearts. We see that God did care about sin, and that it hurt Him. Studdert Kennedy once said, 'The Universal Beauty must create a picture before I can say, I see. Universal Goodness must perform an action before I can say, I love. Universal Truth must have a biography before I can say, I understand.'

The fourth point was Personality. There is just one thing that we can give to God—ourselves. For there is nothing in His treasury save Personalities. Keats, objecting to the phrase ‘a vale of tears,’ once called this life ‘a vale of soul-making.’ And here we are, pilgrims homeward bound for the Eternal City, and we have each one treasure to give our King. What are we doing with that treasure?

Well, I think the chief point is that we should be doing something. Barrie’s words on Courage are still fresh in our minds: ‘There are glorious years lying ahead of you if you choose to make them glorious. God’s in His heaven still. Go forward, brave hearts. To what adventures I cannot tell, but I know that your God is watching to see whether you are adventurous.’ There lie before us such romance, such joys, such peace, such a purity of life that we have never imagined, if only we’ll have the courage to go for it.

There is such tragedy in seeing people who might be kings behaving like slaves, because they won’t take trouble and sacrifice a little ease. The real trouble with so many of us is not so much moral failing or intellectual difficulties as a dull and bourgeois laziness. And so instead of ‘flying from brightness to brightness, the spirit aspiring with outstretched arms to reach the immortal pattern according to which it was

created,' we have the genteel inanity of a conventional religion which neither satisfies us, nor helps our friends, nor glorifies God.

I am the more strong on this head because Christ has been so much to me—everything in the world—and about Him everything I know and have revolves. When I left school I was thoroughly disgruntled with religion. I had tried it, and it hadn't worked. I had steeped myself in the soul-destroying cynicisms of the author of *The Way of All Flesh*. I had habits, friends and a standard of values that made a true orientation of my life impossible.

In the six months following—which included my first term at Oxford—everything was changed, largely through two men, Dr. F. B. Meyer, the great Free Church Divine, and Dean Inge. Dr. Meyer showed me the necessity of making what he called 'a full surrender' to God, of giving up anything and everything in the life that would mar or hinder the Divine Vision. One prayer of his I specially remember: 'Lord, I am not yet willing for Thee to have Thy way with me, but I am willing to be made willing.'

And Dean Inge's book on *Christian Mysticism* introduced me to theology. It showed me the magnificent range of Christian thought and aspiration that has lighted man's path across the centuries. It opened to me the 'thrilling story

of the things God actually has done.' It showed me more clearly the goal and consummation of humanity's long struggle, the glory of God through union with Him who is Goodness, Truth and Beauty. These are 'the ultimate values, which religion calls the revealed attributes of God.' And I saw that one could only know these things by becoming like them; and it set me forth on the quest of the Good, the Lovely and the True. The real Beauty, which is the Beauty of God, peeps almost shyly out of literature and out of nature and 'the warm and breathing loveliness' of humanity itself. Truth, no sudden dawn of light, breaks slowly on our minds in all sorts of ways—through living passionately and thinking hard, out of the time-honoured records of what men have thought and said, from the self-disclosure of God to prophet, poet and apostle, through the character of Jesus Christ. And for Goodness, the life-long fight goes on. 'Ah, Lord, Thy tournaments last a very long time.'

I am a seeker. But I am a seeker because I am a lover, and I am both these things because I have found Jesus Christ.

'Only for guide had I
His Face whom I desired so ardently.'

What is it like, to find Jesus Christ? Dante, in that last stupendous canto of the *Paradiso*, attempts to describe the vision of God, but

cannot. 'As is he who dreaming seeth, and when the dream is gone the passion stamped remaineth, and nought else cometh to the mind again: even such am I: for almost wholly faileth me my vision, yet doth the sweetness that was born of it still drop within my heart.' How can I say, knowing so little, and finding that little so hard to tell?

But it is something like this. It is a glory of great love: it is a new tempestuous joy: it is renaissance, growth and movement. 'Tis a going forth with banners, and a baring of much swords.' It is an ever-increasing unifying and simplicity of life, a great peace of heart, a heightened perception of the whole scheme of things. It is to have the eternal sunshine of God shining within you, filling every hour with wonder and interest. It is to live in the presence of God, whose generous courtesy makes us His friends.

Christianity is a Person, a way of life, and a philosophy. As a philosophy, it 'finds me.' It is a thing which satisfies at once the thinker and the lover. For it is not only coherent, ordered and complete, but it is alive; it has hands and feet. And what do people offer in place of it? Generally a form of agnosticism, the glorification of ignorance, a sort of self-imposed inferiority complex, conscientiously adopted as the

proper attitude towards the Absolute. Yet Christ came, not to make men feel their inferiority, but to show them how to transcend it.

But it is a desperate thing. In the last resort we are to measure life by loss, not gain. Christ speaks to us of the triumphant glories of Resurrection, but no less of the stumbling agonies of the Way of Sorrows. To follow Him literally—and logically—may mean poverty, ill-health, loss of friends, position, fame; it may mean misunderstanding; it is costly all the way along. And it means these things not only in the dim ideal future; it must mean them here and now.

I suppose we would all give anything in the world that this should be true and real for every one of us. For in some measure we know the wonder of it. We have *proved* that when a man lays his life at the foot of the Cross, God's love seems to be released. The complex of past evil is no longer a dead weight on us. God comes Himself and dwells within us, with gifts of forgiveness and deliverance in His hands. And, as the Sadhu said, 'the capital of Heaven is the heart where the King reigns.'

Whereas now 'it is hard for us to do the easiest things, it will then be easy for us to do the hardest things.' There have been times when I have felt that I could never break free from certain sins—and yet this strange power which comes from Christ has done the impossible, and

again and again has given me the freedom of myself. There have been times when I have despaired of getting in touch with God—‘I was swept up to Thee by Thy beauty, and torn away from Thee by my own weight.’ And then suddenly the reward comes: we realise that the struggle has not been in vain: we see and know: we taste and touch and handle: we discover that the environing love of God is round us, close as the air we breathe.

‘Were Christ a thousand times in
Bethlehem born
But not in thee,
Still wert thou all forlorn.’

Is He born in you? Are you willing to do anything to win Him? Because if you are, you *will* win Him. He will be more to you than you ever imagined He could be.

Having Him we will lose much. We must face that. But having Him we shall have the triple star of all that is ultimately worth while—all that is good, all that is lovely, all that is true.

For Religion is much more than a set of dead, schematic rules or a series of so many formal syllogisms; more even than those grand codified experiences we call creeds. Religion is a Person. Religion is One who walked upon this earth in human form, and to-day is waiting at the trysting-place to greet all those who will pledge to Him their love. We press eagerly towards

Him, jostling one another in the race, demanding His approval on this doctrine or that organisation: we see our enemies in the rout, and pray secretly that He will denounce them to our face. But He meets us, 'glowing like a Lover,' with other and more terrible gifts. We go as to a lounge or lecture-room; He receives us on a bare, rock-covered hill. We ask to be convinced of miracles: He takes bread and wine—and lo! a miracle! His love is in our hearts. We say, 'Explain the Trinity': He breathes upon us, saying 'Receive ye the Holy Ghost.'

Out on the grand highway, uphill, dangerous and magnificent, He calls us to adventure everything for love of Him. As we set out on our long journey we seem to have already reached our goal, for He gives Himself to us, as Truth—flooding our minds with clearness: as Beauty—springing up within to lighten life and vision; as Cleanness of Heart—making us His friends. For Jesus leads us into 'that beatific country, which is not only to be gazed upon, but to be dwelt in' here and now.

'All pathways by His feet are worn,
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,
His Cross is every tree.'

SIDELIGHTS ON TOC H.

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